



## ***Meet the Fockers*—How We Are Influenced in Choosing a Mate**

Copyright 2005 © Vic Comello

*Posted on hdbkpersonality.com May 18, 2005, edited Sept. 18, 2006*

In “Meet the Parents,” Gaylord (Greg) Focker (Ben Stiller) had to win the approval of ultra-suspicious Jack Byrnes (Robert De Niro) during a weekend visit to the Byrnes family home in Long Island to gain the hand of fair Pam (Teri Polo). In “Meet the Fockers,” Gaylord has won Jack’s tentative approval, subject to what Jack learns about Bernie and Roz (Dustin Hoffman and Barbra Streisand, respectively), Greg’s parents, during a weekend stay at their Florida home. So this time the whole Focker clan must impress Jack for a wedding to occur. Each movie consists of a series of tests, with the tests providing comedic opportunities for writers Jim Herzfeld and John Hamburg and director Jay Roach. “Meet the Parents” was a better movie, and the short answer why is that the moviemakers wove the tests into the fabric of a plot, which they didn’t (or couldn’t) do with “Meet the Fockers.”

### **Does the Movie Make Sense Psychologically?**

You didn’t really expect a screwball comedy to have great psychological import, did you? Yet even screwball comedies have to hold our interest with something other than laughs, and the best way of doing that is by constructing the plot around some fundamental psychological reality everyone can relate to. The plot of the first movie was based on the special relationship that fathers have with their daughters, which induces

them to become protective of their daughters and wary of any suitors who may invade the family space, or as Jack Byrnes put it, “the circle of trust.”

If you were schooled in Freudian theory, you probably think of the basis for this special relationship in terms of the female side of the Oedipal complex, according to which sons supposedly want to kill their fathers and marry their mothers, while daughters want to do corresponding things with their mothers and fathers, respectively. This, as I say, is what Freud supposed. Freud made many discoveries and managed to correctly interpret virtually none of them when attempting to place them in the context of a unified psychological theory. The Oedipal complex was no exception.

Little kids have a lot to learn as they grow up, and they simply could not learn the essentials without a lot of instinctive help. Kids need to learn not only how to do things, but also how to become persons, and they learn most of this by imitating and identifying with their parents. As a child starts sorting out its own sex with respect to those of its parents, imitation and identification take on a sexual emphasis. Boys try to be like their fathers, and girls try to be like their mothers. How boys and girls learn about themselves as sexual beings is again instinctively driven. A boy is led to try to establish a special relationship with his mother by pleasing her better than his father does. Similarly, a daughter is led to compete with her mother by finding ways of establishing a special relationship with her father, again by pleasing him better than her mother does. In this way, boys and girls begin learning about how to maintain relationships with members of the opposite sex. This innocent learning process is what Freud presented to the world in gross caricature as the Oedipal complex.

Parents tend to respond with special warmth for children of the opposite sex and develop special attachment relationships with them. So when a male suitor comes to the family door, the father instinctively sees this gangly creature as a threat to his attachment relationship with his daughter, and thus tends to react negatively until won over by the suitor. A similar thing happens with a mother when a son brings a sweet young thing home. This sort of universal parental response forms the basis for the “Meet the Parents” movie, in the sense that it is the bedrock upon which the plot of the movie is built. It also is the reason we do not question Jack’s actions even though they take extreme forms.

The second movie does not have this psychological bedrock to build on. Gaylord has won Jack’s approval. End of story. The conflict in the movie is between the two sets of parents, and this situation is not instinctively defined. So there is no psychological hook that an audience can immediately grab onto. The moviemakers, therefore, needed to fabricate one out of thin air. They did this by giving Gaylord’s parents personalities that moviegoers would suspect Pam’s father would not appreciate. While it is possible to build a well-defined plot around such a conflict, it is tricky to do that and still have the movie be a screwball comedy. So what the moviemakers did was abandon all hope of a tightly woven plot in favor of making a movie that consisted of a stream of funny moments.

The movie meanders about as a series of running gags, mostly sight gags. So there is a cat who flushes toilets and a little dog that humps everything in sight, including eventually even the cat. And an adorable little boy who has learned to speak his mind by means of a kind of sign language and who is fed breast milk by Jack Byrnes using a vest

containing replicas of the boy's mother's breasts. Roz Focker is a sex therapist, which is good for a few gags, and Bernie Focker is a thoroughgoing eccentric, which gives Dustin Hoffman permission to go way over the top for laughs at every opportunity. Interspersed with the gags are plot-like situations that appear and evaporate inconsequentially, including an attempt to resurrect the conflict between Gaylord and Jack. Finally the movie focuses on Roz's efforts to make Jack and his wife as lovey dovey as she and Bernie are, by reinvigorating the Byrnes's sex life.

Despite all this contrivance, some elements of the movie do seem to ring true psychologically. The instinctively driven learning process I outlined means that Gaylord would have initially become like his parents, particularly Bernie, only to find that his peers viewed this sweet flaky behavior as being ridiculous. Taunts from them would have induced Gaylord to distrust his instincts, become extremely sensitive to social clues, and act in a somewhat contrived manner that is more socially acceptable than his native way of behaving. So the Gaylord in the movie as played by Ben Stiller does seem to be a psychologically plausible product of his family environment.

Plausible also is Gaylord's insistence on being a male nurse. The movie reveals that he could have become a full-fledged M.D., but didn't pursue that course because he wanted more contact with people than doctors generally have time for. This is quite in line with Bernie's and Roz's values, which Gaylord would have absorbed while growing up.

Does it make sense that Pam would become romantically interested in someone like Gaylord? After all, there is an old adage that says that men marry their mothers and women marry their fathers, and Gaylord was quite different from Jack. Jack valued individual achievement, while Gaylord was raised to believe that he didn't need to be number one in life to be loved. Gaylord was also a much warmer person than Jack in his dealings with people.

The thing about old adages is that they persist because exceptions to them are often overlooked. It is true that a woman would tend to marry a man who allowed her to have the same kind of relationship that she had with her father, if she were entirely satisfied with that relationship. But if she was dissatisfied with her relationship and was not inhibited in seeking a better one, she would tend to seek a husband who was different from her father in ways that would allow her to fulfill her aspirations.

The movie does not provide us with much direct evidence about Pam's relationship with Jack. Nevertheless, given Jack's commitment to individual achievement, one might suppose that he would be less than pleased when Pam announced that she wanted simply to be a grade school teacher. Her desire to take this career path may therefore have contained an element of rebelliousness. The movie also depicts Pam's mother as grasping greedily when Roz held out the promise of a warmer and more sensuous relationship with Jack. That would indicate longstanding aspiration on her part, which Pam would have picked up on and could have shared. Jack was a person who was cold on the surface and only somewhat less cold beneath the surface. Gaylord, on the other hand, was someone who seemed cold on the surface because of his calculating nature but who was very warm deep down. It is therefore conceivable that Pam would have been attracted to Gaylord both because of his superficial similarity to her father and his crucial difference, his underlying warmth.